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SUBJECT: MAURITANIA: INTERNATIONAL CONTACT GROUP MEETING
IN PARIS ON FEBRUARY 20

REF: NOUAKCHOTT 161

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor Andrew Young, 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The International Contact Group on Mauritania (ICG-M) met in Paris February 20. The European Union, France, and the United Nations joined the United States in expressing continued strong support for the African Union's opposition to the August 6 coup, but the Arab delegations noted their opposition to sanctions and took a more conciliatory approach towards the coup leaders. The group accepted a proposal by AU Peace and Security Commissioner Lamamra to ask Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi to hold negotiations between the two sides in Libya. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) On February 20, the International Contact Group on Mauritania (ICG-M) met in Paris. The meeting was hosted by the International Organization of Francophone States (OIF) and the African Union (AU). AU Peace and Security Commissioner Ramtane Lamamra chaired the meeting, which was attended by representatives from the United Nations, the European Union, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), the League of Arab States. Burkina Faso, France, Libya, Russia, Uganda, and the United States attended in their capacities as permanent or African members of the UN Security Council. The U.S. delegation consisted of AF/RSA Deputy Director Peter Henry Barlerin, Embassy Paris's Greg D'Elia and Robert Kaneda, and USAU's Joel Maybury.

AU COMMISSION EFFORTS

¶3. (C) Lamamra noted the February 5 AU Peace and Security Council communique which decided the entry into force of targeted sanctions envisaged in the council's December 22 meeting. He noted also that during the recent AU Summit, the heads of state had expressed their concern over the resurgence of coups. He said he had attempted to explain to incoming AU President and Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi what the AU was trying to achieve, noting that the actions had come with the blessings of outgoing AU President Jakaya Kikwete. He referred to the delegation sent by Qadhafi to Nouakchott and noted that there would be a meeting scheduled in Tripoli to review the results. Lamamra noted the importance of staying unified in opposition to the coup.

¶4. (C) The European Commission's Stefano Manservisi said that the European Union is on the same wavelength as the AU. He said the EU sees cracks in the armor on both sides and is looking for a consensual return to constitutional order. He described the process whereby EU restrictions on assistance to Mauritania are made under the Article 96 Cotonou Accords

process, whose 120-day deadline had expired. The OIF's Hugo Sada noted that Mauritania had been suspended from the organization and that the Francophonie council will meet in April to assess the situation. He said that the position of both parties has evolved and there are some interesting elements in the statements of both sides, but stated clearly that any election organized by the junta was unacceptable.

OIC OPPOSES SANCTIONS

15. (C) The OIC, represented by their Ambassador in Geneva, said the OIC shares the group's condemnation of the coup. He said sanctions were not an effective tool, as these only hurt the population. He noted that the junta has shown some flexibility and said we need to find a consensual solution which focuses on the two leaders -- President Abdallahi and General Aziz. Lamamra interjected that sanctions are designed specifically not to hurt the population but to put pressure on individual junta leaders with travel restrictions and asset freezes.

16. (C) UN Special Envoy for West Africa Said Djinnit informed the group that the AU had formally notified the UN of its February 5 decision on sanctions. The UN is also expected to contemplate sanctions against the coup leaders, but the modalities have still to be discussed. Djinnit said the strategy was to advance negotiations between Mauritanian parties, and never cut out the possibility of direct talks. He noted that President Abdallahi's proposal was a significant advance. French Foreign Ministry Director for Africa Stephane Gompertz said we have to focus on the rule of

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law and a return to normalcy. Sanctions play an important role, but dialogue is also important. The situation has evolved somewhat, but we are still a long way from resolving the crisis. If the election takes place as proposed by the junta it will have no value. Burkina Faso's resident Ambassador pointed to the positive step President Abdallahi had taken by proposing early elections; the question now is how to get to direct negotiations. Libya, as represented by its resident Embassy staff, noted Qadhafi's efforts to engineer a solution had not as yet resulted in a convergence, but felt a positive movement. Libya is not seeking to impose a solution and is opposed to any change of a system by force.

U.S. SUPPORT FOR AU POSITION

17. (C) The USDEL said we support the principled AU position on Mauritania. The USG condemns the coup and supports the immediate return to power of the President. The USG looks favorably on Abdallahi's latest proposal to allow the military leaders of the coup to return to their barracks with honor, to hold early elections, and to form a unity government. USDEL noted a lot of talk around the table of the need for compromise, but the reality was that the constitutionally elected President had already compromised a lot, while the junta had sought every opportunity to consolidate its grip on power. Furthermore, the President was forbidden from entering the capital and the Prime Minister and a number of other cabinet level officials were still being held in prison, in deplorable conditions. (Note: USDEL received four of Abdallahi's spokesmen at the Embassy on February 19 to discuss expectations for the ICG meeting. The FNDD representatives told us that the United States continues to be the strongest advocate for a return to constitutional order in Mauritania. End Note.)

LAMAMRA PROPOSES QADHAFI

18. (C) In response to a suggestion from the OIC that a special envoy be appointed, Lamamra said he had already been to Nouakchott three times and it is always a circus as the various parties attempt to influence the visitor; moreover, he said, going too many times dilutes the effect. He proposed that it may work better to hold talks in Libya as

Qadhafi suggested. This proposal was accepted by the group, eagerly by some, reluctantly by others, and was included in the communique. USDEL made several attempts to inject language reiterating the group's earlier condemnation of the coup, but the Arab League, the OIC, and Libya made the case that it was not constructive to continue condemning the coup, and none of the other delegations supported the U.S. position. France proposed compromise language recalling the position the ICG had expressed in condemning the coup in earlier ICG meetings and communiqués. The United States and France also succeeded in inserting language which deems insufficient the proposals of the military authorities.

COMMENT

19. (C) The ICG is still on the side of the constitutionally elected President Abdallahi, but the Arab League, the OIC, and Libya are far less eager to put pressure on the coup leaders. Nevertheless, a conference organized in Libya to bring the two antagonists together may yield positive results. The EU's Manservisi confirmed on the margins that Spain, Portugal, and Germany are not in favor of sanctions, the former two out of fear that further unrest would unleash another wave of emigration. He nevertheless held out the possibility that the EU could at some point announce the threat of sanctions, which might have a salutary effect, and offered to work with the United States. END COMMENT.

PEKALA